

CHAPTER 6

THE PASSIVE

In the active voice the subject of the verb is the doer of the action:

The children ate everything in the fridge.

In the passive the action is done to the subject, which is the affected.

All the food in the fridge was eaten.

Passive constructions occur frequently enough not as an alternative to the active ones but with their own distinctive uses.

The passive is formed with the verb *be* and a past participle (S + BE + V₃). Rules applying to the use of tenses in the active apply in the passive too. For example, an action in progress now will be in present progressive in the passive:

*We **are dealing** with your problem.*

*Your problem **is being dealt** with.*

The passive occurs only with transitive verbs. Some verbs (*blow, thicken, crash into, dry, sink, fill, increase* etc.) can be used both transitively and intransitively:

*The house **sold** well.*

*The house **was sold** yesterday.*

With such verbs we can change the subject of the sentence without using the passive. These verbs are called 'ergative' verbs.

***They** filled the ditch with water.*

***The ditch** was filled with water.*

***The ditch** filled with water.*

Verbs like *give* and *bring* can have two objects and consequently two passive forms:

1. *Mother **has** always **given** me good advice.*

1.a. *I **have** always **been given** good advice by mother.*

1.b. *Good advice **has** always **been given** to me by mother.*

Because we are more interested in people or animals than things, personal subjects tend to be more common than impersonal ones. Many state verbs cannot be used in the passive, even when they are transitive:

He loves Italian pizza (active voice only).

Verbs like *measure* which can be state or dynamic can only be passive in their dynamic sense:

This piece of land measures 2,000 acres. (state)

This piece of land has been measured. (dynamic)

Only present and past usually have progressive forms:

*The thieves **are being questioned** by the police.*

*They **were being victimised** by their employers.*

However, modals with progressive passive sometimes occur:

*They may **be being** questioned at this moment.*

Transitive constructions with the pattern verb + adverb particle can be used in the passive:

*The meeting **was put off**.*

Only a few verbs of the type verb + particle + preposition can be used in the passive:

*The old rules **have been done away with**.*

Passive constructions are common after verbs followed by the *-ing* form, such as *enjoy*, *like*, and *remember*,

*Most people don't like **being criticised**.*

We can use the passive (*-ing* form only) after conjunctions such as *on* and *after*:

*On/After **being told** the weather forecast she called off the trip.*

A few active verbs sometimes have a passive meaning,

*This surface **cleans** easily* really means 'it can be easily cleaned'.

A small number of verbs are used more frequently in the passive than in the active: *be born*, *be married*, *be obliged*.

*He **is not obliged** to come over whenever you want.*

Adverbs of manner can occur before or after the participle:

*This piece **has been badly played** by the orchestra.*

English uses the passive where other European languages use reflexive verbs like *burn myself*, *hurt myself*:

*Jim **was hurt** in a car crash last month.*

We do not normally use the passive when responding immediately:

~What's the matter? ~I've burnt/cut/hurt myself.

We often use abbreviated passive constructions when expressing wishes:

*I'd like it (to be) **repaired**,*

or preferences:

*I like it (to be) **boiled**.*

● Uses of the passive

□ Spontaneous and deliberate. In fluent English passives occur naturally and spontaneously without a conscious change from active to passive:

*Rome **was not built** in a day.*

The passive is sometimes chosen when the speaker does not wish to involve himself in actions, opinions or statements of fact of which he is not completely certain:

*Thousands of books **are published** every year and very few become best sellers.*

□ For focus. We use the passive when we wish to focus on a happening which is more important to us than who or what causes the happening – or when there is simply no need to mention the doer:

*My car **has been stolen**.*

*Charles I **was beheaded** in 1649.*

□ To avoid vague words as subjects. We always prefer the passive to avoid a vague word as subject (*someone, people, a person*).

*After his lecture, he **was asked** to answer some questions.*

The passive may be avoided when we wish to make what is described as personal:

*Mother **was operated on** last week.*

The passive is used in English where other languages might prefer an indefinite pronoun subject like *one*. In a formal context we would avoid *one*:

*The application has to **be signed** personally.*

The passive is obligatory in notices like *English Spoken, Loans Arranged, Shoes Repaired*. Such notices are normally abbreviated: *E (is) Sp.*

□ To avoid the change of subject. We use passive in order to avoid the use of more subjects in a sentence:

*The Prime Minister **was welcomed** at the airport and **asked** (our reporters asked him) a lot of questions.*

☺ The use of 'by'/'with' + agent

An agent is a 'doer', that is the person or thing that performs the action indicated by the verb. *By* + agent is only necessary when the speaker wishes to say (or the hearer has to know) who or what is responsible for the event in question. Information can be given by means of phrases other than *by* + agent:

*This castle **was built** of stone/before the French invasion.*

With is often used with an agent, especially after past participles such as *crammed, crowded, filled, packed*:

*The square **was filled** with angry people that had invested in the National Fund of Investment and lost their money.*

The difference between *by* and *with* may involve the presence of a person:

*Peter **was hit** with a rock (somebody hit him with one).*

*Peter **was hit** by a rock (it was an accident).*

Make is followed by *to* when used in the passive:

*I **was made** to work hard by my employer.*

Cover and verbs which involve similar ideas, such as *surround*, *decorate* can use *with* or *by*. *Cover* can also be followed by *in*. *Get* is often used instead of *be* before certain past participles (*arrested*, *caught*, *confused*, *delayed*, *divorced*, *dressed*, *drowned*, *drunk*, *elected*, *hit*, *killed*, *lost*, *married*, *stuck*) in colloquial English:

*Not having a map, I **got** lost.*

*He **got** concerned when told about an operation.*

We use *get* when

- We do something to ourselves: *I got dressed.*
- We manage to arrange something eventually in our own advantage. Reflexive pronouns can be use in such constructions:

*She **got** eventually **elected** after all the efforts she had made.*

- In imperatives, commands or insults:

Get dressed! Get washed! Get lost!

- Something (often unfavourable) happens beyond our control:

*We **got delayed** because of the heavy snowfall.*

Many words such as *broken*, *interested*, *shut*, *worried* can be used either as adjectives or as past participles in passive constructions. If the word is an adjective it cannot be used with *by* + agent and cannot be transposed into a sentence in the active.

*She was **worried** about her sick child. (adjective)*

*She **was worried** by mosquitoes. (passive)*

☺ The passive with verbs of 'saying' and 'believing'

Some passive constructions also have the role of implying cautiousness. Thus we have,

1. *It + passive + that-clause with verbs like agree, allege, arrange, assume, believe, consider, decide, declare, discover, expect, fear, feel, find, hope, imagine, know, observe, presume, prove, report, say, show, suggest, suppose, think, understand.*

***It is said** there will be an early spring.*

2. *There + passive + to be + complement with verbs like acknowledge, allege, believe, consider, fear, feel, know, presume, report, say, suppose, think, understand.*

***There is said** to be a new election this year.*

3. Subject other than *it* + passive + *to*-infinitive, with a few verbs like *acknowledge*, *allege*, *believe*, *consider*, *declare*, *know*, *recognise*, *report*, *say*, *suppose*, *think*, *understand*.

***He is considered** to be a genius in Mathematics.*

Other verbs besides *be* are possible:

Dr. Nicholson **is said to know** everything about this disease.

Suppose has two different meanings in:

He **is supposed** to be at work at the moment.

a) People think he is at work.

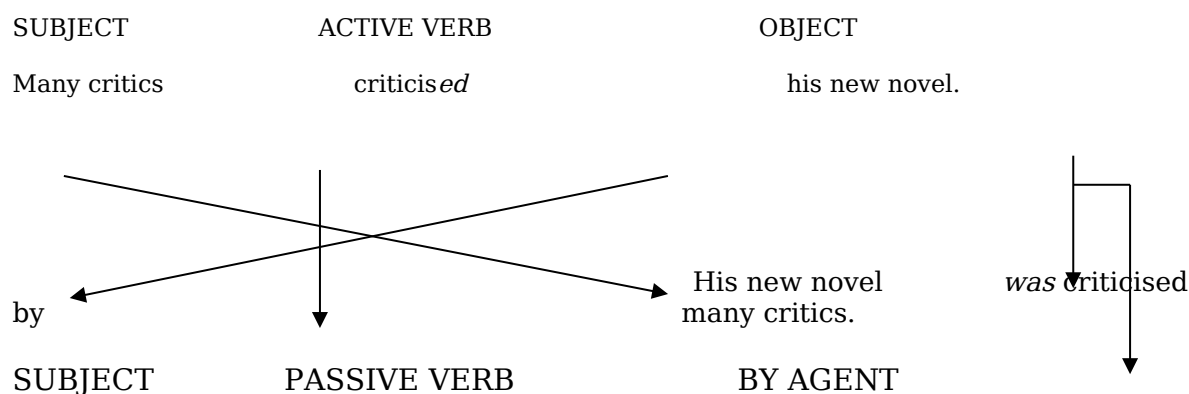
b) It is his duty to be at work.

There + be also combines with suppose:

There is supposed to be a plane to Los Angeles at 4 p. m.

To change an active clause into a passive one we have to:

- replace the active verb phrase by the passive one [be (at the tense in the active) + past participle (of the main verb)];
- make the object of the active clause the subject of the passive clause;
- make the subject of the active clause the agent of the passive clause, when needed by the context.



Except for a few cases, all active sentences with a noun phrase or pronoun object can be made passive having four different basic patterns:

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Active | Passive |
| 1. S V O | S V (passive) by agent: |
| | <i>The detective was murdered by the butler.</i> |
| 2. S V O V | S V (passive) V by agent: |
| | <i>He was persuaded to leave by the police.</i> |
| 3. S V O O | S V (passive) O by agent: |
| | <i>I was given this watch by my father.</i> |
| 4. S V O C | S V (passive) C by agent: |
| | <i>He was considered a genius (by his wife).</i> |

☺ Some typical contexts for the passive

❖ Formal notices and announcements:

Candidates **are required** to present their identity cards.

❖ Journalistic language:

Many people **have been questioned** but the mystery is getting deeper

❖ Headlines, advertisements, notices, etc.:

Kennedy **assassinated**!

❖ Scientific writing (in descriptions of processes):

The mixture **is boiled** in a recipient until it melts.

•The causative

We form the causative with *have* + noun/pronoun + the past participle of the main verb:

*I **have** just **had** my shoes **mended**.*

Get can be used in place of *have* sometimes with a slightly different meaning. There are instances where the past participle can be omitted:

I had a tooth out yesterday (pulled out).

In contrast to the passive we use the causative to stress the fact that we are causing someone else to perform a service for us. We often use it with verbs like *build, clean, decorate, deliver, develop (a film), mend, photocopy, press, print, repair, service*. We do not normally use the active voice (*I'm servicing my car*) to mean that someone else is doing it. Nor can we say "I want to cut my hair" when we mean "I want to have my hair cut."

The causative with verbs like *coach, instruct, prepare, teach, train* can refer to things we cause to be done to other people.

Active→ *I am teaching you English (myself).*

Passive→ *You are being taught English.*

Causative→ *I'm having you taught English.*

This construction is used in the sense of 'experience':

*When he got up to speak, the minister **had** eggs **thrown** at him,*

or of 'allow':

*I refused **to have** my house **used** as a hotel,*

or to describe a present result of a past action:

*We now **have** the claim **solved**.*

Get is stronger than *have* and contains a stronger idea of action by the subject:

*I must **get** this car **serviced** soon,*

and also implies a difficulty. *Get* with an object before *to*-infinitive conveys the idea of 'persuade' or 'manage to':

*I finally **got** the car **to be serviced**.*

EXERCISES

33. Rewrite the sentences in the passive. Omit the agent where possible.

1. Someone has swept the pavement.

The pavement has been swept.

2. People spend a lot of money on presents at Christmas time.
3. Is Tom making a new hen house?
4. Who told you about this?
5. They made her study harder this semester.
6. Jane showed me some paintings that she bought from the exhibition.
7. The teacher is going to teach his students a new chemistry lesson.
8. They may not buy that old house after all.
9. People generally make fun of stupid fellows.
10. My husband walks the dog twice a day.

34. Rewrite the following sentences as shown in the example.

1. It is said that this bridge is the longest in the world.

This bridge is said to be the longest in the world.

2. He is known to make a lot of trouble wherever he goes.
3. They were reported to have sold a lot of stocks.
4. She is expected to have another baby.
5. It is said that they were expelled from the country.
6. He is rumoured to have run away with another woman.
7. It is forecast that strong winds will be blowing next month.
8. The company is said to have big losses.
9. It is believed that the ship sank very close to the French shores.
10. She is widely believed to have won the competition by using drugs.

35. Write in the active the following sentences.

1. I was told that my TV set would be repaired in two days but it hasn't been delivered yet.

They told me that they would repair my TV set in two days but they haven't delivered it yet.

2. Jill was allowed to go on that trip, but was told that she was expected back as soon as possible as she was needed at her office.
3. He had been told how that machinery was to be handled but in the end he was helped by the foreman to have that device started.

4. The house had been painted before it was bought by the new owners who were brought to view it first by my friend.
5. She had been given every possible advice but she got trapped by villains in the tropical jungle.
6. Most of the plants were grown with great care but were destroyed by the bad weather we had this winter.
7. My friend was offered several jobs but she preferred to be sent to work overseas.
8. It is said that new drugs against HIV have been discovered but nothing has been put on market yet.
9. Paula was taken to hospital after she had been injured by a speeding car.
10. This novel was written while its author was held in custody by the local police.

36. Rewrite the sentences using causative *have/get*.

1. The man has asked the porter to open the door for him.
The man has had the door opened.
2. A new dress has been sewn for Frieda.
3. My car is being washed and polished now.
4. Our house will be painted and repaired next month.
5. She asked him to write the report for her.
6. Mrs. Gravel asked the maid to scrub the floor in the kitchen.
7. The boss will deduct money from your salary if you are late with your work again.
8. We called somebody to cut down the old oak tree from the garden.
9. Did you ask the milkman to bring two bottles a day?
10. He employed an architect to design the plans for the new house.